

## Thailand's English Future (Part Two)

In a previous article, I suggested that much more effort and funding is required for English language development if Thailand is to enjoy the benefits of globalization (and not become a "global victim").

I argued that Thailand has much to do in order to acquire the higher level of English ability now expected in commercial and professional communication around the world.

To rely on the sons and daughters of wealthy families to take responsibility for Thailand's communication with the outside world is no longer appropriate or practicable. It is not practicable as the sheer volume of English language communication required outstrips the capacity of the wealthy families to manage it. It is inappropriate because Thai people wish to live in a stable democratic state, in which there is some equality of educational and occupational opportunity.

So how do we get out of our current position as a country that is relatively poor in English language ability overall? (Thailand is the poorest performing of ASEAN nations on TOEFL tests, for example). How do we move from widespread weakness in English, even among civil servants and school teachers, to a position where at least school teachers, middle to higher ranking civil servants and middle to senior managers in private companies are able to function effectively in spoken and written English?

### **The most effective model of education for Thailand**

Few now disagree that the most effective means by which Thai children can acquire a strong command of English while not losing their Thai language and culture is bilingual education. This was acknowledged by the government in March 2005 and has not been rescinded. However, the difficulty for government schools has been the cost of employing expatriate native or near-native speakers of English to teach the English-medium part of the program.

All schools – private and government – have had to charge fees to cover the costs of bilingual programs, which means that most Thai children have not been able to enroll in

them. The danger of this situation, if it is allowed to continue for long, is that, in addition to the various kinds of division already found in Thai society – based on poor education, lack of resources, ethnicity, gender, rural location, and so on – another divide will be created between those who have English (and, hence, a key to better jobs) and those who don't.

One obvious option to avoid the dangers of the linguistic divide would be to ban bilingual education, but that would be to turn this country's face away from the rest of the world by refusing to adopt the most effective and culturally acceptable means of teaching the international language. Thailand would become like Myanmar. It is not a serious option.

Some way needs to be found to make the learning of authentic, effective English available to a greater number of Thai children, and available to children who are not financially prosperous as well.

## **CLIL**

One suggested solution is CLIL (content and language integrated learning), and the Ministry of Education is currently supporting some pilot CLIL programs in government schools. They are being advised by the British Council and a Finnish university (CLIL is popular and successful in Finland).

Now, CLIL is a European term. It simply means "language immersion". It is not new; it is something that Thai bilingual schools have been doing since the first trial bilingual program started in Bangkok in 1992. One does not have to follow the European model to be doing "immersion". The Canadians started in it the 1960s.

The assumption in European CLIL, however, which is only practicable on a very small scale in Thailand, is that no new or additional teachers are used to implement it. If a subject is to be taught in English, the subject teacher does it. An expatriate teacher or specialist English teacher is not brought in to teach CLIL. This, of course, is quite practicable in countries like Finland and Holland, where CLIL is widely practiced and successful, but would be very

difficult to implement in Thailand, where very few subject teachers have the English ability to teach their subject in that language. Also, very few Thai students have the ability to learn in it (unless they've had immersion in English previously).

### **The necessity of bilingual education**

Let's hope the CLIL trials here will be successful, but even so the model will not be transferable to other schools for the reasons stated above. Thailand is not Finland or Holland – countries where bilingualism is widespread.

Let's also note that CLIL tends to be Eurocentric. When Dr Amy Tsui from the University of Hong Kong pointed out in a discussion on CLIL last year that Chinese speaking students in Chinese-medium schools had done better in their university entrance tests than students in English-medium schools she was told by the British expert that it was because Hong Kong teachers taught English badly (compared to their Dutch and Finnish counterparts).

What is clear, however, from Thai bilingual education and from the experience of teaching English as a foreign language in Thailand over many years is that

subject/content immersion in English is necessary for efficient and effective authentic English development in schools. To ensure that students really do understand the content and to develop Thai language and values, immersion in Thai is equally necessary. For this to be done at a cost that all parents can afford the teachers must be Thai nationals working under the same conditions as other Thai teachers, though perhaps with some benefits and incentives to encourage people to take up immersion teaching.

For this to happen, a long-range plan to train teachers needs to be developed and implemented. It might take 20 years to reach the point where there will be enough well trained and competent English teachers that they can ensure the sustainability of a Thai English teaching profession able to teach bilingually, but "a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step".